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Music Education: The Case of Annie Curwen

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Definition: During the Victorian era male writers dominated the field of publications on music education despite the fact that a large component of the music teaching profession was female. One notable exception to this rule was Annie Curwen (1845-1932), known more frequently during her lifetime as Mrs J. Spencer Curwen, whose widely-circulated writings and public lectures laid out an accessible, child-centred psychology of music teaching. A generally forgotten writer on music pedagogy, Curwen was a remarkably successful public figure by the end of the nineteenth century, delivering prestigious lectures across Britain that were buoyed by the success of her first book *The Child Pianist* (1886). Her innovative contributions to how child psychology can be applied to music teaching still bear relevance for music teachers today.

Keywords: Annie Curwen, psychology of teaching, music education, reception, tonic sol-fa

Introduction

Due to the fact that male authors overwhelmingly dominate the field of writing about music education in the nineteenth century, the life and works of Annie Curwen (1845-1932) provide a fascinating exception. Now largely forgotten and almost entirely omitted from mainstream

histories of music education in Britain, Curwen was widely successful during her lifetime as the pioneer of a child-centred approach to the psychology of music pedagogy, publishing widely and giving public lectures across Britain from London to Glasgow. Curwen's writings consequently had a deep influence on the development of the psychology of music teaching in Britain, and the multiple reprinted editions of her first book, *The Child Pianist* (1886) that proliferated well into the first quarter of the twentieth century are a testament to this fact. It is noteworthy, however, that there is currently no academic research that has been done specifically on Curwen; much of the information for this article has been compiled from primary research (such as newspaper reviews of her writings and advertisements for her public lectures). Rather, the overwhelming focus on the name "Curwen" has, since the nineteenth century, been granted to her husband, [John Spencer Curwen](#) (1847-1916) and to his father, [John Curwen](#) (1816-1880), both of whom spearheaded the tonic sol-fa singing movement in Britain (McGuire 2009). It was Annie Curwen, however, who innovatively applied the accessibility of the tonic sol-fa movement to a Herbartian psychology of piano teaching (see below) that could be relevant to broader readerships and to more members of the music teaching profession. Thus, while Annie Curwen (arguably) might not have published so successfully without her connections to the Curwen family music industry, her writings broadened the scope and appeal of child-centred approaches to piano teaching. As such, Curwen is an indispensable figure in the history of Victorian women writers on music education.

Annie Curwen was born Annie Gregg in Dublin, Ireland in 1844. She trained at [Dublin's](#) Royal Irish Academy of Music, and taught the piano in Ireland before moving to [Scotland](#), where she first encountered the tonic sol-fa system of music notation, which was gaining clout

amongst children and working-class musicians across Britain from the mid-century onwards (McGuire 2009). Based on a highly accessible form of musical notation that was constructed around alphabetic recognition of scale degree names (“d” for “doh,” “r” for “re,” etc.), the pedagogical appeal of the tonic sol-fa system was that it was an easily accessible means of sight-reading music that did not require knowledge of conventional staff notation, which took much longer to absorb, and which was far more expensive to print. The marketing appeal of tonic sol-fa notation, moreover, was that it could be printed more cheaply than staff notation because it only relied on alphabetic letters. This kind of pedagogical accessibility appealed to Annie Gregg, as she believed in making a child’s entry into music education as seamless and manageable as possible. Notably, the tonic sol-fa system itself had actually been developed by another woman, Sarah Glover (1786-1867), whose *Scheme for Rendering Psalmody Congregational* (Glover 1835) was the first treatise on the sol-fa method. However, Glover did not achieve personal fame or much recognition in her lifetime, as the tonic sol-fa system was only made famous by the ambitious Curwen family, and came to be almost exclusively associated with the Curwen publishing industry (McGuire 2009). Through exposure to the growing tonic sol-fa movement, Annie Gregg eventually met John Spencer Curwen, manager of the Tonic sol-fa publishing company in London, who she married in 1877. Both she and her husband spent most of their careers working on educating teachers; indeed, the Tonic Sol-fa College was the only music institution in London at the time to provide education specifically for music teachers, and to pursue critically a philosophy of music pedagogy (Golding 2018, p. 142). John Spencer Curwen appears to have been supportive of Annie’s teaching and writing career, and embraced her desire to apply the methodical, musical accessibility of the tonic sol-

fa singing system to the more advanced philosophies of piano pedagogy that she encouraged her students to pursue.

Scholarship on Curwen

As mentioned above, academic literature on Curwen is remarkably sparse, particularly when considering the wealth of literature covering the contributions to Victorian music education that were made by her husband and father-in-law (McGuire 2009; Rainbow 1967 and 2010; Simon 1973). For example, McGuire's book on the tonic sol-fa movement (McGuire 2009), which even includes a chapter on the female associations of the movement with [suffragist](#) music and domesticity, does not mention Annie Curwen, nor does Bernarr Rainbow's exhaustive work of Victorian music education (Rainbow 1967 and 2010). In Simon's history of the Curwen Press (which, in 1886, published *The Child Pianist*) there is only one mention of Annie Curwen, in briefly acknowledging the efficacy of her teaching methods within the Tonic Sol-fa College (Simon 1973, p. 71). More recently, Golding has noted, in passing, the significance of Curwen's lectures at the [Incorporated Society for Musicians](#) in 1892 in speaking out against the bureaucracies of registering music teachers (Golding 2018, p. 142). In terms of the history of philosophical and psychological theory, Spitzer's aesthetic research has also related Curwen's Herbartian influences in her published works to the idea of musical progression in nineteenth-century [aesthetic](#) thought more broadly (Spitzer 2004, p. 69). All of these texts, however, mention Curwen only fleetingly, if at all. Even in academic texts that focus specifically on Victorian women musicians (Gillett 2000; Welliver 2001), Curwen is barely mentioned (not at all in Gillett, and only once in Welliver 2001, p. 142).

The omission of Curwen from mainstream academic literature, however, does not line up with the popularity of her writing, as well as the ubiquity of her public persona, within nineteenth-century Britain. Curwen's first book, *The Child Pianist* (1886), was a direct application of the psychology of accessible music education to the piano. While she believed that advanced pianists would necessarily need to learn standard staff notation, Curwen's outlook was that every music student should be exposed to music, from the time that they are infants, in an accessible and entirely natural progression that started with nursery-rhymes, moved through to tonic sol-fa note recognition by voice, and eventually culminated with learning staff notation at the keyboard when the child was physically and psychologically ready. The popularity of the *Child Pianist* is evident in that it was reprinted in several editions from the 1890s through to 1913. While it is difficult to ascertain the book's exact print run, it was reported in the *Musical Herald* that by 1895 the *Child Pianist* was being used as far afield as New Zealand (Anon 1895a, p. 152). Notably, the most widely-successful editions of the *Child Pianist* that were published from the late 1880s onwards were issued under the title *The Teacher's Guide to Mrs Curwen's Pianoforte Method* – perhaps capitalising on the fame of her husband, and emphasizing to the reading marketplace her respectability in marriage.

After the first quarter of the twentieth century, Curwen became more widely known for her 1920 book *Psychology Applied to Music Teaching*, which expanded the notion of a methodical, stepwise psychology of music pedagogy beyond the piano to music education at large, and focused on the psychology of the child's developing mind, based on the principles of German philosopher and psychologist *Johann Friedrich Herbart* (1776-1841). Herbart, as noted by music aesthetician Mark Evan Bonds, was an opponent of nineteenth-century idealism in

that he insisted on “verifiable results and noncontradiction,” regarding “technical construction as central to the essence of each art, including music” (Bonds 2014, p. 160). Herbart’s valuing of logical, non-idealist technical construction can also be seen to inform the *Child Pianist* and Curwen’s public lectures from as early as the 1880s.

Public Presence

In the public sphere, the fact that John Spencer Curwen was such a public figure to begin with enabled him to promote Annie’s research and to accompany her when she travelled to give public lectures. Such was the success of her first book that she was even invited to give lectures to non-music educationists at the *Froebel Society* (Anon 1887, p. 64), and eventually was also asked to teach a vacation course at *Oxford University* in 1913 (Anon 1913, p. 278). These events not only intensified the sales of her book, but they also made the appearance of a female public lecturer on music less of an oddity. Numerous newspaper reviews throughout the 1880s and 1890s, none of which explicitly mention her gender, praised “Mrs Curwen’s” teaching methods for their logicity and accessibility; for example, an article entitled “Logical Pianoforte Teaching” appeared in the *Musical Herald* in 1893 in reference to a lecture that she gave to the Teacher’s Guild in London (Anon 1893a, p. 10). She was also a regular speaker at events such as the “Ladies’ Teachers Conference” that occurred as part of the Tonic Sol-fa Convention (Anon 1895b, p. 57).

In 1893 Curwen’s husband accompanied her on a highly successful lecture tour across *Scotland* that was prompted by the success of the *Child Pianist*. During this trip she spoke in Edinburgh and Glasgow to audiences of c.300-400, usually comprised of working music teachers

(Anon 1893b, p. 299). Curwen's main claim was that the teacher should assess the developmental and psychological readiness of each individual student for learning the piano; music education should have already started in infancy with nursery songs, then progressed to tonic sol-fa singing, and only then, once the child was confident with musical production through the voice, should this education progress to staff notation and the piano. As she wrote at the outset of the *Child Pianist*: "If the years up to seven or even eight are well filled with musical experiences, first through rote-singing and then note-singing, the time is not lost, and the opening intelligence of the second period of childhood is better able to cope with the complexities of instrumental work" (Curwen 1886, p. 3). In other words, Curwen's method as laid out in these lectures was to teach philosophical concepts, movement, and a system of accessible music theory, before the child even sits down at the keyboard. Thus, for teachers, expecting the student to have technical skill only on the instrument was not enough; they must first understand the psychology behind music teaching in order to be helpful to the student. As one newspaper reviewer summarised: "Skill on the instrument was not sufficient; they must understand the principles of mental acquisition and of education, in order systematically and surely to draw out the faculties of the pupil" (Anon 1893c, p. 339).

In an interview published in 1898, Curwen stated that: "As a pianist, I saw that teachers of the pianoforte, as a rule, lacked the educational method and enthusiasm that possessed the Tonic Sol-fa teachers of singing." She claimed that, since then, her "aim has been to make pianoforte teaching logical and intelligent, to apply to pianoforte teaching the same principles that are applied to the teaching of more ordinary subjects, principles which are not accepted by educationists as the basis of all teaching" (Anon 1898, p. 200). Curwen then assiduously made

the point that most music teachers, raised themselves on the unimaginative memorisation of musical exercises, had not been conditioned to read psychology.

Summary

The number of newspaper interviews and reports of Curwen's public lectures to male and female music teachers cited here are but a small sample of the wide public recognition given to Curwen in her lifetime by the British music industry – and, by extension, the colonial musical world, with teachers showing interest in her work as far away as New Zealand. Thus, her name certainly deserves a place amongst the more mainstream histories of music pedagogues in Britain. Her work was formative in helping to raise the status of the music student at the keyboard from of the expectation of mindless rote learning, to a more modern psychological experience of music perception as belonging to both the mind and body. While Curwen achieved fame largely through her husband's publishing agency, the warm reception given to her ideas by a wide variety of reading and listening publics demonstrates that there was a growing space within late-Victorian society for recognizing the female author, lecturer and teacher as an authority on pedagogical developments.

Cross-References: Education; Music and Musicians; Psychology; Suffrage

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